

The devil and Justice Scalia

By [Jonathan Grieser](#)

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There was a good bit of incredulity in my Twitter feed the other day in reaction to the [interview with Antonin Scalia](#) in which he confessed to belief in the devil. His response to the interviewer should have silenced the Twitterverse:

You're looking at me as though I'm weird. My God! Are you so out of touch with most of America, most of which believes in the Devil? I mean, Jesus Christ believed in the Devil! It's in the Gospels! You travel in circles that are so, so removed from mainstream America that you are appalled that anybody would believe in the Devil! Most of mankind has believed in the Devil, for all of history. Many more intelligent people than you or me have believed in the Devil.

He's absolutely right about the persistence of belief in the devil among American Christians, although it's inaccurate to claim that "most of mankind has believed in the Devil, for all of history."

Among those concerned with Scalia's statement is the *Huffington Post's* voice of liberal Protestantism, [Paul Raushenbush](#), who's worried about how Scalia's belief in the devil might affect his legal rulings. I think there's plenty of evidence to support the idea that Scalia's legal opinions are shaped by his underlying legal philosophy and leave the devil out of it.

I'm actually more intrigued by other aspects of what Scalia said. First off, he volunteered the information in such a way as to suggest that he might have been trying to provoke the reporter. Second, he's obviously thought about the devil's techniques—why people don't seem to see the devil in appearance, for example, or why the devil doesn't possess a herd of pigs (he got that story wrong, by the way). Scalia says, "The Devil used to be all over the place." Scalia can only conclude from his relative absence that "he's gotten wilier."

What might be even more interesting is that Scalia isn't sure whether Judias Iscariot (Jesus' betrayer) is in hell:

I don't even know whether Judas Iscariot is in hell. I mean, that's what the pope meant when he said, "Who am I to judge?" He may have recanted and had severe penance just before he died. Who knows?

Now, I don't think that belief in the reality of the devil as depicted in much of western art is necessary to salvation (you know, horns, forked tongue, cloven hoofs, tail, all of that). The image of the devil as it has developed over the last 2,500 years in Judaism and Christianity is an attempt to understand and personify evil. It may not be necessary to personify evil in order to begin to make sense of it, and some of us may find such personification childish.

It's easy to laugh at stories of Martin Luther throwing ink pots at the devil. But Luther, like so many Christians before and since, sensed the power of evil in the world around him and fought mightily against it. To laugh at someone's belief in the devil is to risk laughing at evil, dismissing evil as a figment of one's imagination. One can't fight evil unless one is able to name it.

Scalia points to something else: even when we perceive someone as evil incarnate, it shouldn't be impossible to imagine them redeemed by the love of Christ. There's a simple reason for that: as powerful as evil might be, God is yet more powerful.

Originally posted at [Grieser's blog](#)